

LAY DOMINICAN CONGRESS, 2011

The annual Lay Dominican Congress was held from the 21st to 24th July this year at the Endsleigh Mercy Centre, Hull – a very comfortable and welcoming venue, which we have previously used several times – following our plan of alternating between the north and south of England, which is intended to help those living furthest away to attend at least every other year. It was noted, however, that many of the same people seem to come regularly, no matter where the Congress is held!

The topic this year was *A Vision of Virtue*, the most popular suggestion from those put forward in 2010. All the talks and discussion periods showed how contemporary this subject is – timeless, in fact – and how surprisingly up-to-date St Thomas Aquinas always is, as our starting-point was his treatment of the Cardinal Virtues. We followed the pattern set last year, following each main talk, whether morning or afternoon, with a coffee or tea break, then half-an-hour of discussion in small groups, and finally a plenary session with discussion of problems or questions presented by the leader of each group and dealt with in depth by the main speaker. This format was again found to be a very satisfactory way of utilising the time and expertise of each speaker, and giving enough time to get to grips with the subject and broaden its modern application. The only participant to complain was Hogan, the young guide dog belonging to our blind friend David, as he (Hogan, that is) did not get the exercise he really wanted in the spacious and exciting grounds of the Centre!

Our first evening started with Vespers, Rosary and Mass, ably led as always by Fr Richard Conrad OP and our pianist/cantor Pamela McNeil of the Cambridge fraternity. After dinner, the President, Patrick Doyle, welcomed us and set the scene; then Fr Richard (who is also our Provincial Promoter) introduced the Virtues by explaining “*How to be Happy*”. The day ended restfully with Compline. Friday began with the Office of Readings and Lauds after breakfast. The rest of the morning was given to our old friend, Fr Vivian Boland OP, whose main talk was on “*Prudence in Practice: Virtue in Aristotle and Aquinas*”, in which many of us found a rather difficult subject greatly illuminated and clarified. Prudence, in St Thomas’s sense of the word, is a very different virtue from a Micawberish caution! Indeed, as we heard, it is the very basis of all the virtues: the use of right judgment and balance, the rejection of evil, no matter how attractively dressed. After lunch we met Sir David Goodall, a retired diplomat of world-wide experience, especially in India where he had been High Commissioner. He gave us a very lucid account of the complexities of pursuing an ethical foreign policy, under the heading “*Justice in Practice*”. There were plenty of questions and comments in the ensuing discussion period, and he received our very warm appreciation and thanks. Before Dinner we celebrated Vespers and Mass, and afterwards Fr Richard gave us one of his inimitable slide-presentations with commentary, on “*I was in need and you took care of me: the Last Judgment in Art*”. A sobering message before a quick visit to the Bar, and bed.

On Saturday after Lauds and Mass we held the Lay Dominican Annual General Meeting, attended by all 28 participants (excluding the Dominican brethren); we got through a good amount of useful business and reports from the various “job-holders”. In the afternoon, David Cross, the Cafod representative for the north of England, spoke movingly about “*Living simply that others may simply live*” to illustrate Temperance in Practice; it generated plenty of useful discussion. For the Social Evening, Patrick Doyle had prepared a Quiz, which we all enjoyed; then instead of raffling the goodies that had been brought for that purpose, Peter Kilty (Leicester) was appointed Auctioneer: he has evidently missed his vocation, as he raised over £130 for the coffers! The evening ended with “On Ilkley Moor Ba’t ’At”. The highlight of our final morning, Sunday, was Fr John Farrell OP’s talk entitled “*Beyond Virtue: The Spirit’s Personal Guidance*”, in which he movingly drew together the threads of all that we had heard and mulled over during a wonderful weekend of prayer, study, friendship and happiness.

The 2012 Congress will be at the Carmelites, Boar’s Hill, from Friday 20th – Monday 23rd July.